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ABSTRACT

The paper provides a brief description of the organization and content of the final report of a 4-year study of programs for gifted students. The sections of the final report cover the following: (1) Findings of a survey of the educational backgrounds of MacArthur Fellows, which indicate the importance of parents, good teachers, and supportive peers and notes that school systems reward behavior patterns inappropriate to independent thinkers, researchers, and artists; (2) A survey completed by 400 schools and 1,172 districts, which provides a picture of fragmented and discontinuous programing; (3) Specific illustrations of sound programing practices, including internships and mentor progams and school-college cooperative programs; and (4) Recommendations for administration, identification of talent, program development, staff development and teacher support, and program evaluation. (CL)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EDUCATING ABLE LEARNERS PROGRAMS AND PROMISING PRACTICES

A National Study Conducted by the Sid W. Richardson Foundation

June Cox, Neil Daniel, Bruce Boston

March, 1985

Education is today's commitment to tomorrow. Our nation and its schools must accept the responsibility of meeting young minds at appropriate levels — challenging them, sharpening them. With a particular concern for able learners and determined to encourage educational activities that would let superior students learn as much and as fast as they could, the Sid W. Richardson Foundation set out to discover (1) what programs for able learners exist, (2) which programs are most effective and offer the best chance for adaptation to many environments, and (3) what recommendations would assist all types of schools in serving able learners. After four years of study and evaluation, the Richardson Foundation offers this report of its findings and its recommendations.

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SUMMARY

Introduction. After a Foreword explaining the general purpose of the study, the Introduction sets the context by describing in general terms what we know about programming for able learners. The Foundation's survey is, so far as we know, the most complete examination of current programming for able learners yet attempted. It comes at a time when a spate of national reports (some seven are reviewed) have American education under a microscope. This study differs from the others in concentrating its focus on those superior students we call "able learners."

The methods of the study are described in the Overview. They include conferences of leaders in the field of gifted/talented education, site visits to programs of promise and reputation, a survey that began with a mailing to 16,000 public and parochial school districts and ended with an analysis of nearly 1,600 completed questionnaires, mini-conferences of practicing teachers and administrators involved in programming for able students, and evaluations by two groups of experts from inside and from outside the field of education for the gifted.

A survey of the educational backgrounds of MacArthur Fellows, based on their responses to an informal questionnaire, provides observations on education from a group of creative, self-motivated adults. Among the generalizations that emerge are the importance of parents, good

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teachers, and supportive peers; the need for independence with appropriate structure; and the recognition that our school system, public and private, rewards patterns of behavior inappropriate to an independent thinker, researcher, or artist.

What's Happening. This section of the report presents, in question and answer format, the information reported on the questionnaires returned by 400 schools and 1,172 district. We found that nationally the efforts to improve education for our most capable students are fragmented and discontinuous. Even locally, in school or district, programming efforts are likely to be patchwork. Symptomatic is the part-time special class, the "pull-out" program, which is the most prevalent practice for educating able learners. We think the pull-out program, a part-time solution to a full-time problem, should be replaced with more comprehensive programming.

What Works Best. To offer specific illustration of sound programming practices, we describe five program types that meet the special needs of able learners. Education with an international perspective is illustrated by the Denver International School, which meets the requirements of both the French Department of National Education and the Colorado State Education Agency and incorporates a total-immersion foreign language approach. We introduce the International Baccalaureate by tracing the development of the IB and Pre-IB programs in Houston and with a visit to the Armand Hammer United World College of the American West, in Montezuma, New Mexico.

Our treatment of Internships and Mentor Programs touches on both the national Executive High School Internship Association and programs localized at the state level (Illinois Governmental Internship Program) and local level (Dallas Executive Assistant and Creative and Performing Arts Programs). It includes a description of the Texas A & M University Career Education model and adaptations of that model in Weslaco, Texas, and Carrollton-Farmers Branch, Texas. Although some effort is made to distinguish between an internship and a true mentor relationship, we use the terms as they are used in the school districts that employ them.

The chapter on A Shared Commitment: School and College suggests that for some able students the simplest way to provide an appropriate academic challenge is by allowing students to advance into college-level work before they graduate from high school. Advanced Placement courses offer one way to achieve such acceleration; concurrent school-college enrollment is another. We look at early entrance to college as a natural extension of accelerated coursework, citing the experiments at Johns Hopkins and at the University of Washington as examples.

Programming for Excellence in the Summer is a way of meeting the special needs of able learners year round. We visited programs that serve students of different ages and abilities. The National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan, and the National High School Institute at Northwestern University, are two of the country's oldest summer programs. Governors' Programs were initiated by the Governor's School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in the sixties. A more recent development is the summer programs associated with the national talent searches carried on at four university centers around the country: Johns Hopkins, Duke, Northwestern, and the University of Denver.

Specialized Schools are designed to meet the learning needs of students with sharply focused abilities and interests. We have examined some private schools: Project Pegasus, an Iowa State University lab school, and Oaks Academy in Houston, for gifted and talented students at the pre-school and elementary levels. We look at schools that are part of their public school districts — Windsor Park Elementary School in Corpus Christi, Texas, and Cincinnati's Walnut Hills School. Some of the schools are for students with specialized academic interests — the Bronx High School of Science and the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics, Cincinnati's School for the Creative and Performing Arts, Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, and the North Carolina School of the Arts.

What Next. Responding to the final part of our three-fold charge, we offer our recommendations about cultivating intellectual talent in a variety of settings. We begin with discovering and nurturing talent, emphasizing that identifying unusual learning abilities and helping those abilities to flourish are different parts of the the same process. We accept Howard Gardner's view that there are many discrete kinds of intelligence, and we agree with J. McVicker Hunt that proper stimulation can enhance a child's learning abilities. We pay close attention to the special methods required to discover talent among traditionally neglected groups, the economically disadvantaged and the culturally diverse. We therefore encourage attention to various abilities uncovered in a wide range of contexts, and we argue for eliminating rigid "cut-off" scores in the selection process. We favor throwing a wide net in early childhood and later allowing the educational programming to select those students with unusual talent and motivation. The goal, we suggest, is to see that no individual talent withers for want of opportunity.

The conviction that students should move ahead on the basis of mastery may be the most important concept for educators designing programs for able learners. To illustrate the importance of flexible pacing, and that it is possible in many contexts, we describe the practice in two laboratory schools (at

UCLA and at the University of Pittsburgh) and in a large public school district in Plano, Texas. We also describe flexible pacing at the secondary level, at Bishop Carroll High School in Calgary, Alberta. Theoretical support for continuous progress with flexible pacing is offered by Julian Stanley, who recommends longitudinal teaching teams that span kindergarten through 12th grade.

We do not, however, advocate acceleration to the exclusion of enrichment. No matter how bright, students should not race through school without ample opportunities to explore widely and delve deeply along the way. As an alternative to the most wide-spread enrichment practice, the "pull-out" program, we recommend enrichment in the regular class, perhaps of the sort Renzulli describes in his Enrichment Triad Model.

Much of what we recommend can be summed up in the phrase "Comprehensive Programming." To illustrate the meaning of the phrase, we describe the efforts to meet the needs of able learners in Marshall, Texas, and in Chicago. Without claiming that either district has an ideal program for its superior students, we show how each district attempts to integrate its offerings across the disciplines, at all levels, and with the cooperation of diverse agencies. Included in each effort is an attempt to assess existing strengths and resources and to build intelligently on what is in place.

Before offering a summary of our recommendations, we imagine how a hypothetical district in a mid-sized city might go about constructing a comprehensive program. The imagined district goes through a period of assessment so that it can capitalize on its strengths. It provides flexible pacing for all students at all levels and works gradually toward developing specialized schools for students with clearly focused interests. The district relies on the resources available, involving parents and the private sector. It pays attention to staff development for its professional educators. At the same time the district reaches out to the parents of young children to help them nurture the learning abilities of their youngsters and to involve the parents in the cultural and educational life of the schools. The imagined school district is not real, but it embodies our conviction that so long as whole communities keep in mind the learning needs of every student, including the most able, improvement is possible.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

While our report has several audiences, we present our recommendations to schools and districts who are initiating or adapting comprehensive programs for able learners.

Administration

- Develop a written philosophy for the education of able learners that is consistent with the goals and values of the school district and community. This fundamental first step should include a careful consideration of all the recommendations that follow.
- Select a coordinator or coordinators during the early planning stages. As the person responsible for the success of the program, the coordinator should participate in the planning.
- Assess the current program for able learners. Those elements that serve their needs well may be retained and expanded as other options are added.
- Adopt flexible pacing at all levels. Recognizing that not all students learn at the same rate, allow students to advance as they master content and skills, at whatever pace is most natural and offers the steadiest challenge for each.

Discovering Talent

- Broaden the process for assessing student abilities. This recommendation is implicit in our adoption of the term "able learners," intended to include a larger population than those customarily identified as "gifted students."
- Assess the abilities of all students, and use the results as a basis for appropriate programming decisions.
- Recognize that there is neither a single kind of intelligence nor a single instrument for measuring intelligence. Rather there are multiple intelligences and multiple measures.
- Encourage parents, primary teachers, and others responsible for the supervision of children to note their abilities and interests early and to provide appropriate stimulation. Remember that discovering and nurturing talent are inter-dependent.
- Observe the ability of children to solve problems or fashion products over an extended period as an indicator of interest and ability.
- Use puzzles and games that young children find motivating to discover their talents. A child's ability to recognize patterns in a given intellectual realm will indicate potential in that intelligence and aid in developing an intellectual profile. Pay close attention to the child's ability to use other symbol systems as well as the verbal.
- Give thoughtful attention to special groups such as minorities. Avoid tests that are dependent on English vocabulary or comprehension. Supplement testing with checklists of characteristics valued by the subcultures. The screener should understand and respect each population and, if possible, speak the child's native language.

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- Use a wide range of testing strategies, including out-of-level testing. If students' abilities are to be assessed with standardized instruments, be sure they have a good congruence or "match" with the objectives of the curriculum and programming.
- Throw a wide net, keeping entrance requirements fairly modest and tentative. Avoid arbitrary cut-offs. The goal is to include all students who can benefit from enriched programming rather than exclude any who are marginal. Monitor regularly and let those with talent and motivation move ahead.
- Avoid labeling any group of children as *the* gifted. To do so implies that some children are gifted in every area, and other children are gifted in none.
- Provide a psychologically safe environment. Teach students to value their abilities and to use their individual strengths.

Program

- Recognize the importance of counselors in several capacities: participating in student assessment, ministering to the affective needs of students, guiding program selection of students, and counseling in career and college choices.
- Build a comprehensive program as you would piece together a mosaic. Do not expect all elements to be in place at once.
- Take care that programs are sequential, carefully integrated, and articulated throughout the system.
- Offer program options that reach through and beyond the normal institutional boundaries: across disciplines, across grade levels, and across levels of intelligence.
- Encourage independence through projects that culminate in real products and employ the methods of inquiry used by real scholars.
- Develop specific plans for concurrent enrollment at all levels — elementary/middle, middle/high school, and high school/college.
- Recognize that a few students will benefit from the opportunity to leave school and enter college early.
- Make use of community resources, including the private sector. For example, include one-to-one mentoring relationships between students and business and professional leaders, or offer internships at the secondary level so that students can examine one or more career interests as an aid to informed academic and career choices.
- Cooperate with area museums, arts organizations, and civic groups to increase educational options available outside the school walls.
- Encourage students to participate in some of the fine educational programs available after school, on Saturdays, and during the summer.
- Consider specialized schools if the population of the community and the district's resources will support them. Although an ambitious undertaking, a residential school can serve a wider area than a single school district, and the school can be a laboratory for teaching strategies and curriculum content.
- Recognize that racing through the curriculum is not the primary goal of a well-conceived educational program. Balance acceleration with enrichment activities for diverse types and degrees of intelligence.

Staff Development and Teacher Support

- Consider staff development a continuous process for teachers, consultants, and administrators.
- Develop teaching strategies that are appropriate to the learning styles of able students, and encourage a wide range of thinking and questioning skills.
- Arrange for joint planning among teachers at different levels with careful attention to the K-12 sequence in each content area.
- Help teachers develop a manageable record-keeping system that allows them to monitor student progress without undue loss of instructional time.
- Provide the regular classroom teacher adequate support services — clerical support, for example, or a resource teacher — so that enrichment is available to able learners in the regular classroom.
- Use nearby colleges or universities as a resource for ongoing staff development and for innovations in curriculum as well as for educational research.

Evaluation

- Plan the evaluation design as the program is being developed. It is necessary, for example, to establish base line data in order to monitor progress.
- Conduct comprehensive and regular program evaluation to assure accountability. The evaluation design must answer questions about the success of individual program elements and about their impact on student growth and achievement.
- Employ an external evaluator or team of evaluators to reinforce internal evaluation, to assure objectivity, and to add credibility.

NOTE: The complete report will be available in the fall of 1985 from the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, Texas 78712.